Elizabeth Hay/DAVID

The mail arrives with a letter from David. A barely readable envelope, and inside, a card with nothing on it, a handful of stamps, a smaller envelope with my daughter's name written on it and Brooklin, misspelled, and New York — petering out.

A photograph he took hangs above my desk. One of a series shot in Yellowknife of weeds in water, weeds in snow. This one is weeds in snow. The stems stick up like fine, precise calligraphy: stick legs, his legs, now.

Last spring he was very thin. He still limped but no longer needed a cane. The leg infection that "went crazy."

"Why?" I asked.

A pause. And then, "I might as well tell you."

Our conversation was on the phone. I saw him the next day, toyed with the idea of leaving my daughter behind, but it would have hurt him so much. And how could she have come to any harm?

"The hardest thing," he said, "is to have so little energy."

In the kitchen he washed his hands carefully. "They say that's important. Not to let any dirt get under your nails."

He called at 1:55 a.m. Alec answered. When he crawled back into bed I asked him what David had said.

"It's all roses and hospitals here, so tell Lizzie to send me a rose. A rose is a rose is a rose. Send it to the children's hospital, yeah, the children's hospital. Or send it to a hospital there and I'll get it quicker."

"What else did he say?"

"He said he was walking with a cane and a rich couple in fur passed him, and he thought of you. I asked him how his mother was and he said, Fine — worried about me, I'm worried about me, I'm worried about my friends. They all think I'm dead. But I'm not dead. Then he switched to French. He said, I'm here in Toronto. No. I'm in Mexico. No, I'm in France. In Toronto. No. Mexico. I'm in Mexico. I bought a ticket. I'm going at Easter."

"He was so brilliant," his mother said when we went to visit, and she burst into tears. "That's what's so hard. To see him now."

She hurried away so that he wouldn't see her crying.

Her insomnia keeps step with his. When he can't sleep he wanders around and changes everything in the house, writes on things, paints on them, cuts them up and pastes them to other things. And so she stays awake too. A month without sleep. Bringing us tea.

David said, "When I start to quarrel with my mother the answer is to go from one room into another."

In his bedroom pictures of us were on the wall: bathing our feet in the stream at Palenque, buying tortillas, climbing a ruin. Next to the pictures were several Mexican masks, a photograph of our hotel in San Cristobal, a Mennonite quilt, a child's drawing of a bone.

David sat down in a rocking chair and reached for a book about the artist, Joseph Beuys. He showed us two photographs of Beuys with a cane. "And my brother just happened to give me this the other day." A hat, almost exactly like Beuys's fedora. David put it on.

"It's almost too much," he said.

Then he put buttons, embroidery thread, pieces of scrap Christmas paper in a box already full of things he had saved for us. He threw in a handful of change. "Do something with them," he said.

We were leaving — David was lying down upstairs, we had said goodbye and were already in the driveway — when his mother hurried out and from the porch said to us in a low voice, "The painting. You should take it back."

One of my mother's paintings. David had asked to have it — a portrait of a bandaged torso. "I think it would heal me."

Now his mother was anxiously bringing it back out. "I'm afraid he'll draw all over it," she said.

I smelled Mexico so clearly a little while ago. Cuernavaca. The smell of the street where I first stayed. A dream from last night?

When David came to see us we took him to Chiapas. In the square in San Cristobal a woman sat on a bench with a wide bucket of meringue at her feet. Soft, white, shiny, sweet. In the morning David's breath was visible in the air when he leaned out the window.

David and I walked to Zinacantan. Coming down the hillside he

picked a pink thread off a bush and put it into his notebook. I noticed him noticing, which was how I noticed for a long time. We walked into the full colour of the village: the lipstick pink of tunics and shawls, the lighter pink of peach blossoms. Threads and petals were underfoot.

Pink knocked on pink: two girls at a door.

Pink stretched out on the grass: two men.

Pink stretched out on the floor: Maria's weaving. Was she working on it when we knocked?

We asked if she could make us something to eat, there was no restaurant in the village. Only tortillas and salt, she answered. Eggs? Yes, she could make eggs. She sent her younger brother off to buy them while we waited inside the little house.

Her eyes were bad, she told us. She was 18.

"Would glasses help?"

"We don't wear glasses."

"Why?"

"We don't."

"Custom?"

"Yes," she said.

Later she showed us wedding pictures of her older sister, and her brother. He wore glasses.

We sat on the only two chairs, David and I, with a low narrow table between us. Maria brought sweet coffee, and questions. Is it colder in Canada than here? How do they make houses? What do they eat? Can you live on wheat? Here, she said, people are strong eating corn, and they say in Europe and North America people grow fat on bread.

"Are you married?" she asked. We smiled, no.

And then, "How old are you?"

"Guess David's age," I said.

"Fifty," she said.

I laughed but David was shocked. At the time I thought it was vanity, and it surprised me.

David was reading a book set in Mexico in 1932. An Indian died and his family put tortillas in his coffin. They wet his lips several times for the long journey.

Outside Chamula we walked through the cemetery on the hill. I

jotted down all the different spellings for died: fallecio, fallesio, fahecio, failecio, facio. Small crosses were painted black, or white and blue, the lettering was crude.

For over a year David had already had deep and vicious boils that wouldn't go away. The leg infections that eventually "went crazy."

One afternoon while he slept outside in a hammock, Alec and I made love in the tent and conceived our daughter. I've always thought of David as her guardian angel. Death? As a guardian angel?

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A valentine from David. I open the envelope and hearts fall out, keep falling out. Ten of them cut from fluorescent orange and pink paper, from regular red and white paper, and from a snapshot. Cut rather crudely. They make my eyes swim.

In fact, only nine. The tenth is the torn corner of the red envelope.

Also a poem.

MY HEART BROKEN
BY MY CANE
LET'S YOU AND I TALK ABOUT MATISSE.

We were driving through snow listening to jazz. In a warm car, warmed by jazz, listening to snow. And now I'm in a hot bath and Coleman Hawkins continues in the other room. Thirty-two hours of him on the radio.

Eskimos listened to jazz in the twenties. Rasmussen came upon an igloo where they were starving, and fed them. Then he watched as they produced a gramophone and told him "in sober earnest" that jazz was as soothing to a full stomach as it was comforting to an empty one.

Hot music in a snow house.

Matisse — in my house. Cards from his series called "Jazz" decorate the walls; the full colours of hunger satisfied. I send one to David.

In the months when David suspected he had AIDS but before he knew for sure, he made a series of drawings using black ivory pigment made from burned bones. He set up a tent in his studio, laid pieces of

paper inside, used a bellows to blow in the pigment, and allowed it to settle on the paper. He drew on the dust with his fingers. He said he wanted the drawings to resemble the marks left in snow on a tranquil day.

A few years ago we walked over to Broadview and Gerrard and went into three Chinese groceries. We looked at bowls and talked about ways of containing loneliness. David said it would be a struggle not to become isolated, I would have to fight. He advised me to fill my days as full as possible by having friends over and by going to visit.

He reached for a can of lichees. "You've eaten them?"

"No."

"Well," he said, "we'll have to eat them in these green bowls," reaching for two, "because the colour of the lichees against this green is beautiful."

We made our purchases and walked to his apartment where he opened the can of lichees, washed the two bowls, spooned in the fruit. The lichees were white against the green. I told him why Keith and I had separated. He was surprised, and not surprised.

His apartment was orderly in a sensual way. In the kitchen a wooden shelf ran along the counter just above the sink. On the shelf sat other Chinese bowls, and above them — a photograph of clay pots arranged against a wall in Pompeii; the bowls echoed the pots in the photograph.

In the hallway I looked at his photograph of an old house in Quebec. He pointed out the precise use of white: the lacy woodwork on the double screen doors was white, but the doors had been left a weathered gray; the posts at the side of the steps were white, but the steps and the verandah were gray. The effect was considered, restful.

Luxurious, like cream. David said he needed cream for the sauce he planned to make. We walked to a store, and he asked me to get the cream while he ordered the meat at the counter. I was slow, comparing prices. When I reached for the 18 percent David was already beside me taking the 35 percent. He smiled, "Why not?" So we had the richest of sauces.

As we ate I looked at the reflections in the window beside us: the lamp hanging low over the middle of the table, the bottle of wine, our profiles. The wind blew and the branch of a scotch pine brushed

against the window. We were four floors up. David had chosen the three most beautiful discarded Christmas trees on his block, carried them home, wrapped a rope around the trunks, and hoisted each one up to his apartment balcony. He built three bases for them, and set them upright alongside his window.

Some time after my marriage with Keith ended, David said to me, "I've been thinking a lot about colour. It's so intimate. Like you and the rubrum lilies."

"You mean the wedding bouquet?"

"Yes. We cut them and arranged them and handled them. It's very intimate."

We had done this the night before the wedding. I had cut the flowers in the garden and taken them over to David's apartment where he made them into a bouquet.

"The colour," he said, "with your dress. I remember your dress being mostly gray and the colour of the lilies set if off."

We cut the stems and held the flowers this way and that, our hands touching, till we settled on the final arrangement.

David continued to talk about flowers — he had brought five sprigs of freesia and we smelled them over dinner — and that was intimate too. Next to each other, conversing, next to the flowers.

"He's not here," his mother says when I call. "He's in Toronto and he's in a lot of trouble. Last night he demolished Stephen's apartment, and tonight he's supposed to stay with Eric — I don't know whether you know him — and he hasn't got any money because he lost his wallet."

"What do you mean demolished?"

"Well, he demolished a lot of things around here too. He paints on everything, spills paint everywhere — because," she says, "he just wants to paint."

Stephen said months ago that he couldn't deal with David anymore. He said that one night David had talked nonstop without taking a breath for seven hours. All of it nonsense. Brain damage. Memory loss. Unable to tell the time. Unable to count. Therefore unable to take his own medicine.

He would get up in the middle of the night and frantically write notes to himself, none of them legible. Demand to be waited on hand and foot. Insist — for four hours — that the colour television was no good and they had to buy another.

One night Stephen called friends over to help because he couldn't "settle him down," and "as soon as they stepped in the door he was as good as gold." The minute they left, "He was pounding on my door again and I knew I'd be up with him till four in the morning."

Stephen put David on a bus to Owen Sound. He called David's parents to tell them he was coming, and they pleaded with him to wait a day until they could come and get him. Stephen put him on the bus anyway. David — not knowing where he was — got back off, wandered around, soiled himself, finally got hold of a friend by phone who came and picked him up.

After David "demolished" his apartment — upsetting drawers in his desk, pulling books off shelves — Stephen had the lock to the apartment changed. This was the apartment he and David had shared for seven years.

David can still write postcards and short letters, though after writing one his hands are very tired.

"What do they feel like?"

"A thousand pins and needles."

He says he can't move "except with a cane and a wall." Sleep is very difficult because his legs go into painful spasms — they're always jumping — and that wakes him up.

Stephen is bedridden, he tells me. And his mouth and throat are so full of thrush that he can't talk. "Or so his mother says."

"You don't believe her?"

"I don't know. She's cut him off from everybody."

"You think she's trying to keep you from talking to him?"

"Or maybe it's just Stephen. He's cut himself off. He'd be one to do that. And you know, I love him, but I'm ready to move on. And you know what I'm ready to move on to?"

"What?"

"A relationship with a lady. I already have someone in mind — but she's not available."

I go through the box of things David saved for us: a picture of a hummingbird torn from a magazine, buttons, a small tourist pamphlet of a church in Alsace, clump after clump of embroidery thread, a scrap of tie-dyed material, fuchsia and white, two knitting needles, a piece of lace, a package of hooks and eyes, a notebook written in backwards and upside down. The only words I can make out are To Stephen, and Nose Knows. Colour samples for paint: tangerine, vienna blue, peacock green. A postcard addressed to Sochi Elizabeth Jean Hay. More lace, two whistles, a pink balloon, shoelaces, a stamp from Cuba, one from Vietnam, one from Laos.

He calls to tell me that Stephen has died. "Me next," he says.

"What did David say?" Alec asks.

"Just that Stephen died yesterday, and me next."

The distance on the telephone — 700 miles — and the distance of my reaction, I know. David's quiet voice.

"He isn't able to go upstairs anymore," I say. "He's confined to the first floor now. His feet won't move."

More samples: van gogh yellow, garnet red, pink casino, billiard green, firmament.

A crochet needle.

"Make use of them," David kept saying. "Do something with them."

I write to Stephen's mother. In addressing the envelope I put down, unthinkingly, Stephen — then white it out.

When David was small he took the dry turds out of his diaper and lined them up in a perfect row on the windowsill. As a young man he made a series of drawings by puncturing large sheets of paper with a sewing machine. In other drawings he scored lines with the blade of a meat cleaver. In some there were barnacle-like holes.

"Bullets," he said.

At the Scarborough shooting range he pinned sheets of paper on the wall and two policemen shot holes in them. They used 33 calibre rifles in order to make pencil-sized holes.

"Were they interested?" I asked. "Curious?"

"No, the only thing one of them said was, 'Let's try a shotgun'."

The drawings were so peaceful and intimate. How can this be? I wondered.

Down the street in a friend's studio three photographs hang on the wall. They show a dead dog lying in a woods, the fur dusted with snow, then covered lightly as though with wax, then covered completely. A burned down candle — soft, splayed out — a puddle with just a bit of height. Softly burning snow, snow softly burning in a dead dog candle.

The dog must have been hit by a car, and dragged itself into the woods to die.

I reread a letter from David.

"Dearest Liz,

The garden out the window is exquisite, we've been getting rain. Early morning light makes it so beautiful. The cat is lying on the deck washing himself.

The AIDS disease now has me crippled up to my waist plus my hands are partially useless. Still try and draw a little but it's next to impossible. Cat fell asleep. Sunshine.

Raspberries have been abundantly ripe in my sister's garden. (He draws a raspberry and shades it red.)

The hibiscus on my desk is in bloom. Exquisite colour — coral."